

Shizutani School

— The oldest free public school in the world —



THE HISTORY

Shizutani school goes all the way back to 1666 when Ikeda Mitsumasa, the feudal lord of the Bizen Area, made an inspection tour throughout the country and came across Kidani Village in Wake, which turned out to be provided with better conditions as a site of education than anywhere else. He then made up his mind to found a school there for the commoners. In 1670, after two years' trial, Tsuda Nagatada, his chief vassal, was set to the duty to complete the school. Since then, this place has been called "Shizu-tani" instead of Ki-dani from the fact that it's "a quiet and peaceful valley" nestled in the mountains. Also, he displaced all his fief he had in Kidani Village under the direct rule of the school, so that the school might support itself with what Kidani Villagers offer and pursue the cultural development concentratedly, free from politics, in case the Ikeda family should be shifted.

In that feudal age, there were few cases in which public schools were established by regional lords to educate the promising aristocratic, Bushi. It is a surprising thing that a school open to the public existed there. Actually we might say he was not only a personage of fine character but, unlike many of his contemporaries, he was also one of the most enlightened lords. "Better public morality is all up to the education of the common people", was what he thought. And this spirit has continued in Okayama Prefecture.

UNIQUE FEATURE

The first unique feature in Shizutani School is the roof made of Bizen Ware tiles. It has caused the authentic success in harmony with a sanctuary of Confucian School. The top-rounded stone-wall surrounds the school, stretching as long as 837 yards. The stone arrangement in Chinese style is precious and harmonizes with the rest of the school. This is the second; and the third is the choice of building materials—camphor, zelkova and Japanese cypress—all selected with the most possible care and the main structures are lacquered in black or transparent. The lapse of three hundred years has added to the lecture hall floor its gradually accumulated luster, and the whole appearance gives one marvelous impression of what flows in the current of the eternal history.

Close examination reveals the structural carefulness toward it. ~~The tiles~~ of the roofs are put one over another in three layers so that rain would not leak through the ceiling in the case the upper tiles should be broken.

Each roof has a quite different symbol on its tiles from those of the rest. That of the lecture hall is "Six leaves", the Shizutani Shrine's is "the Swallowtail" which, at once, symbolizes the Ikeda family, and the Confucian mausoleum one means "Academic Freedom".

By the side of the lecture hall, there is a special room in which Lord Ikeda would rest when he visited the school. It is the graceful tearoom style and also full of the simple and sturdy spirit of Bushi.

THE CONFUCIAN SHRINE^{②*}

In the centre of this Confucianist school is the chapel or shrine of Confucius. Most of the buildings that form this shrine are arranged according to the Confucian style of architecture from China. Crossing a pond and going up 19 stonesteps through the school gate (Gate of the whooping crane)^①, we reach the shrine. Through the outer gate we enter the court, the east and west corridors, Taiseiden - Hall, the library, the kitchen and the Keiseistone, surrounded by a mud-wall. They are all authorized as Important National Cultural Properties. Taiseiden-Hall, the main shrine, was constructed in 1684. Its building materials were selected with great care. It is the oldest building in the present Shizutani School. It is 19 feet 5 inches square, one-storied, and rests on a foundation - stone like a round bun. Inside, it has a latticed ceiling and beagonal tiles laid all over the floor. A vermillion-lacquered octagonal miniature shrine with an image of Confucius stands in the center.



THE STONE WALL^⑩

It will be the grand panorama on the stone wall that attracts our attention first when we visit Shizutani. The stone wall runs in both directions from the school gate (Gate of the whooping crane) and surrounds the school site. It was built in the Chinese-style. In cross-section it is horseshoe-shaped. It is 6 feet 7 inches both in height and width. It is 837 yards long going round by the hillside, along the mountain stream.



Even now the stonewall hasn't even one weed growing on it.

* See map. The number indicates the building in the map.

SHUGEISAI^⑥ AND THE TEA ROOM^⑦

By the auditorium are Shugeisai and a tea room, a suspended ceiling connects them. Shugeisai may have been used as a class room for Chinese writing. We can easily imagine that the floor was matted from the structure of the floor. The tea room was really the rest-room for students. Directions are inscribed on the edge of the hearth in the center: "You are not allowed to use any fuel except charcoal in the hearth." We cannot help admiring this carefulness. Students must have observed this rule faithfully for the ceiling is not darkened by smoke.



A POND^⑬

Shizutani school has a pond in front of the Confucian shrine outside the school gate. This pond is said to be an imitation of the landscape gardening of ancient China. The pond of the Okayama clan school is crescent-shaped. It has a bridge in the center and a stone pavement on both sides. That of Shizutani school is square and has a bridge in the center. This pond is on a large scale, 23 feet wide and more than 110 yards long.

LECTURE HALL^③

The Grand Assembly Hall is 35 feet 5 inches wide and 41 feet 4 inches long from one beam to another, greatly influenced by Confucianism in its style. It is roofed with Bizen Ware tiles, as the rest of the main buildings are. From the Inbe pottery works, skillful potters were invited here and a new kiln was built in order to make these tiles. This resulted in roofs with great dignity.

The Lecture Hall was completed in 1701. In the contrast, Lord's Rest Room^④ is simple and of the tea-room style, and was made frequent use of during the daimyo's long stay here. These two buildings seem to show the lord's richness in culture and what was his mental attitude for study.

The tile-thatched assembly-hall and the single thatched Lord's Rest Room stand side by side. They go well together without a hint of disharmony.

The inside of the Lecture hall resembles a medieval-style building. It consists of a main hall and an antechamber next to it, supported by 10 camphor columns. In it, there is no other adornment than a framed calligraphy and two regulation boards on the wall. Both floor and columns are lacquered and so are glossy like a mirror, as if new. The wood is zelkova, Japanese cypress and camphor, which even today



is not warped at all.

Lord's Rest Room has two small rooms, each 8 feet 10 inches square. One of the two has a fireplace in the floor. There are knobby, roughly finished, pillars, and slender bamboos cover the ceiling. However, this is not of elegant dignity though of extreme simplicity. Darmer windows, for example gives us an excellently matched view of mountains and sky, when we sit in this room. A bath room and a small anteroom are attached to it.

THE KEISEI STONE

The Keisei Stone is a square stone-column, resting on a base stone. A sacrifice is tied to this stone on the day of the festival of Confucius. It stands formally in the precincts of the Confucian shrine and the Shizutani Shrine.

THE CAMELLIA HILL^③

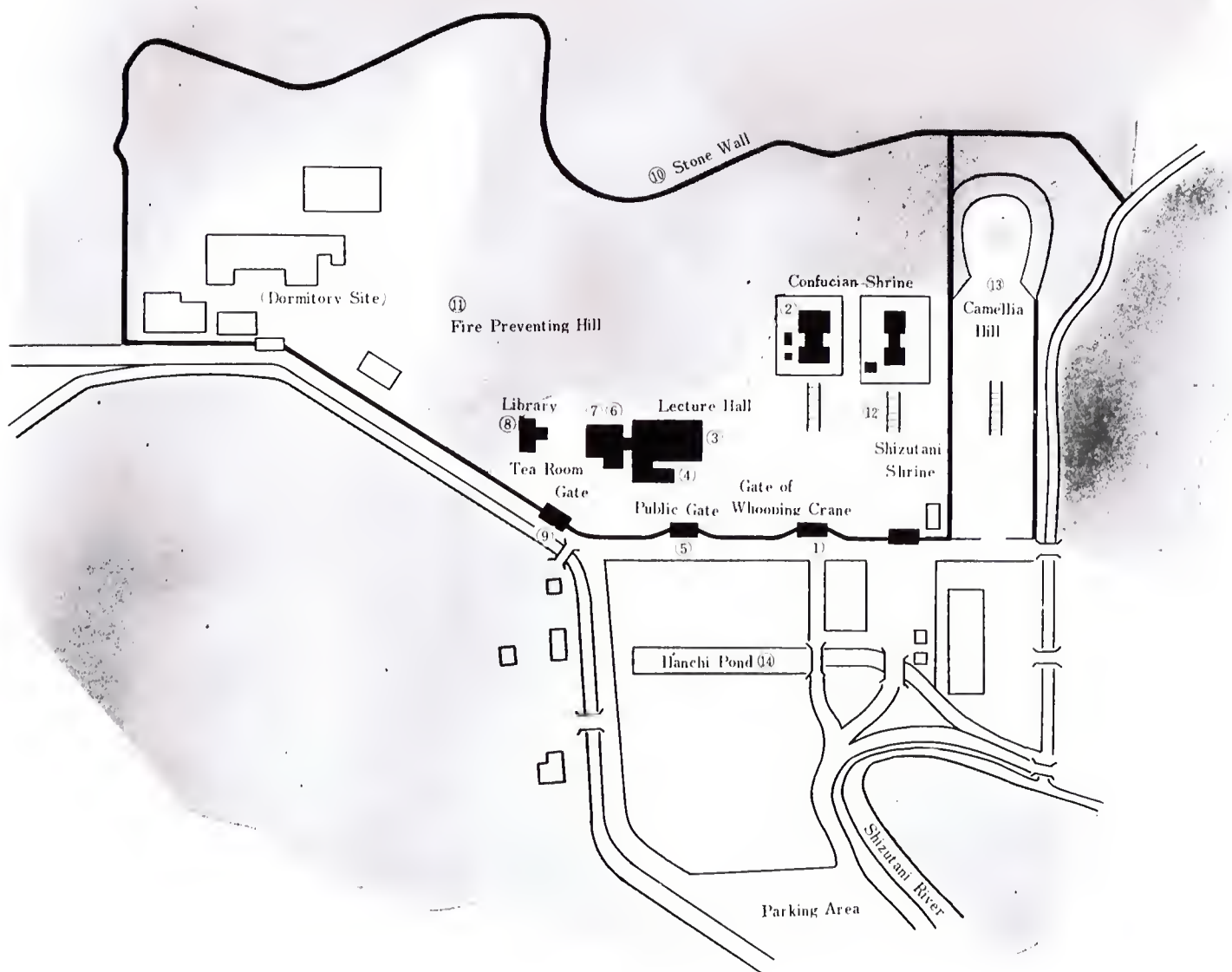
A camellia garden is located on the small hill near the Shizutani Shrine. It was made in 1703. The hair, mustache, nails and teeth of Lord Ikeda Mitsumasa are kept in this place. Here many camellia trees are planted. This is a sequestered place.

THE KOYO-ARBOUR (The Arbour of autumn leaves)

There is a thatched-roofed hut toward the east of the ruin of Tsuda Nagatada's house. This is the Koyo-Arbour. It was built in 1813 as a recreation and resting place. It was named after the following Japanese poem of Fujiwara Teika: "It is late autumn. I see the hills turn red or yellow day by day when it drizzles."

THE CONFUCIUS IMAGE

The Confucius image is a gilded seated figure made of bronze, 4 feet 5 inches tall. The outer frame of the structure in which it rests is all black-lacquered and beautiful.



- ④ Lord's Rest Room
- ⑥ Class Room
- ⑦ Tea Room